

The Politics of Intellectual Emancipation: An Introduction to Rancière's Radical Egalitarianism, Aesthetic *dispositif*, and Dissensus Democracy (First of Two Parts)

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Abstract: This piece embarks on the principle consistently echoed in Jacques Rancière's *œuvre*: the principle of equality. From this principle, I re-conceptualize his philosophy of radical equality from its generic aesthetico-political reception, focusing more on the ambit of the political and pedagogical experimentations of the egalitarian axiom. This will set a framework for understanding Rancière's notion of political subjectivization—the importance of which serves to address the contemporary problems of political compromise and its consequent pathological culture of passivity. Thus, the discussions warrant a panoramic undertaking of an emancipatory politics drawn from the fundamental lessons and insights of Rancière's philosophy of radical equality. I argue that the totality of Rancière's emancipatory politics, centered on the verification of the principle of equality, offers a three-fold solution to combat political decadence and democratic decay. This consists of a) the presupposition of the principle of equality in the form of intellectual emancipation, involving a specific vigilance to one's historicity (or the historical belongingness later realized as a

condition we must overcome); b) the construction of new worlds in the practices of dissensus (both political and aesthetic), or the production of new forms of sensibilities that would undermine the structural foundations of the dominating police order; and lastly, c) a radical theory of political subjectivization—one that introduces new forms of subjectivities appropriate for a truly egalitarian world. This piece, being first of two parts, explores the first fold of Rancière's politics of intellectual emancipation. The whole discussion is guided by the question: *What is the principle of equality and how does Rancière theorize emancipation using the principle both as groundwork and ideal par excellence?*

Keywords: democracy, principle of equality, radical egalitarianism, vigilant historicity

“The good side of an economic relation is that which affirms equality; the bad side, that which negates it and affirms inequality. Every new category is a hypothesis of the social genius to eliminate the inequality engendered by the preceding hypothesis. In short, equality is the *primordial intention*, the *mystical tendency*, the *providential aim* that the social genius has constantly before its eyes as it whirls in the circle of economic contradictions.”¹

“Equality was not an end to attain, but a point of departure, a supposition to maintain in every circumstance. Never would truth speak up for it. Never would equality exist except in its verification and at the price of being verified always and everywhere.”²

INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION OF POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY

It is necessary to begin with a political question which, according to Giorgio Agamben, “never ceases to reverberate in the history of Western politics: *what does it mean to act politically?*”³ This question continues to haunt us contemporaneously, as we witnessed a perverse growth of political apathy in many democratic societies in the past few decades. Such predicament of the contemporary world is indicative of a political culture of passivity among individuals in relation to their sociopolitical realm. It is a state wherein people, instead of actively engaging with others on political, social, or at least moral concerns, which thus genuinely upholds that nature of being human as a political animal, uncritically socialize and involve themselves with their fellow for a variety of reasons deemed instrumental, if not coercive. An individual may partake in political and social concerns, but such partaking is conditioned by certain malevolent social forces, or

¹ Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Chapter 2, trans. by The Institute of Marxism-Leninism, in *Marxist Internet Archive*, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/poverty-philosophy/ch01b.htm>>. Italics and modifications mine.

² Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross (California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 138.

³ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attell (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2. Emphasis mine.

least motivated by expectations from society. Nevertheless, these participations cannot qualify as active political engagement, only reactive ones and, thus, passive. Citizens are forced to engage, diminishing the socio-political enthusiasm in them.

Indeed, this social pathology of being politically uninterested in committing ourselves to the welfare of everyone left us wondering about why we are utterly passive today. And while there are many possible reasons that justify and explain this social phenomenon, two among them are deemed significant in our investigation: First, the marriage of individualism and neoliberalism. The neoliberal paradigm brought to us the understanding of individual freedom as ultimately realized in its absolute dependence on market economy. Following a capitalist rationality, neoliberalism maximizes the power of the free market, enshrining its legitimacy on a normative level: people *should* engage in the free competition of the market in order to acquire the maximum freedom possible. In order for citizens to exercise their autonomy, they must engage with the trends of the socio-economic sphere. This was an opportunity for capitalist market economies in different political settings to flourish alongside the growth and realizations of human potentials, creativity and productivity.⁴ And this extends to the global economy, for products today are now imported and exported. However, at the backdrop of this scenario is its susceptibility, if not negligence, of ignoring the human condition under capitalism's oppressive tendencies. People thus continue to experience oppression and fragmentation in the neoliberal capitalist

⁴ Ian Raymond B. Pacquing, "Neoliberalism and our Precarious Culture," *Kritike*, 11:1 (2017), 130-131. Meanwhile, Francis Fukuyama was convinced of this neoliberal paradigm. Fukuyama thought that because of systemic *modus operandi* of neoliberalism, the era of ideological battles has ended because the best form of market economic system (referring to capitalism) meets the individual's fundamental political nature of freedom and liberty. It is from these reflections which Fukuyama would claim that the liberal economy of the market, as the capitalist enterprise groundwork, is the final arrangement of modernity. Cf. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), ix.

society, which perceives the former only at the level of an individual's market value.

Our freedom is now measured according to the wealth of the market economy. Every human effort, in order to know the degree of its expression of freedom, must first be measured on whether or not it could be marketable and profitable. The neoliberal paradigm prioritizes a kind of individualism that is dangerously susceptible to a precarious egoism.⁵ The only thing that matters to the market would be the individual's productivity, regardless of any social category one belongs (e.g. race, gender, morals, religion, culture, family structure, etc.). As a result, individuals tend to care less about things that are immunologically distant from one's daily, personal, [thus] subjective concerns, even when they engage in politics and society. Without realizing this predicament, people's political activities continue to be devalued, their purposes compromised and their values corrupted by neoliberalism, as they showcase their freedom only within the bounds of economic reason, regardless of how political the intents and results could become. Neoliberalism incorporates into the political psyche of a social order, i.e., the realization of our goals in life is what neoliberalism desires and redirects it to achieve economic welfare of the few.

If one goes by the neoliberal logic of the market, then she is compelled to think that goods which do not flourish consequently turn into waste. Reification involves that individuals think of their socio-political capacities to be normatively determined by the products and their consequences. Products, therefore, determine the producers and consumers. The downside of this logic is that only the product matters, neither the producer nor even the process of production. It is from this neoliberal capitalist schema by which individuals are forced to think passively about their market values, instead of being able to act autonomously. Neoliberalism tolerates the individual to be more passive in

⁵ Pacquing, "Neoliberalism and our Precarious Culture," 140, 143.

their engagement in society. Individuals concern themselves not with what they could do actively political in society, but rather with how they are perceived to be valued by social institutions and thus be given the privileges they desire. To use a Habermasian description, politics is reduced into an 'interest' politics.⁶

The second reason of what causes political decadence and a culture of passivity may be traced from what is referred to as 'the explicative order'⁷—society's explanatory justification of the order and its legitimacy as somewhat natural and pre-given. Todd May claims that the explicative order of society is epitomized by the mainstream political philosophies,⁸ specifically on how these theoretical enterprises, by virtue of the term *enterprise*, are aimed at justifying and preserving the systemic order of domination and oppression. These philosophies, according to May, define equality as a cultural product which is created, preserved and is protected by institutions.⁹ In this sense, *equality* becomes something that is

⁶ Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. by Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971). See also Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume I: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

⁷ Rancière views the explicate order as the institutionalization of the logic of stultifying explanation in the heart of society's life. In this social terrain, explanations are necessarily used in order to maintain the status quo from any forms of deviancy. It was necessary, therefore, to instate intellectuals that would provide the justifications in order to reproduce the system of oppression. Cf. Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 4-8.

⁸ Todd May describes the philosophies of distributive justice by John Rawls, Robert Nozick's libertarianism and the Amartya Sen's capabilities approach to political theory as philosophies of passive equality. In Nozick's libertarianism, liberty (as an expression of equality) can be exercised by the individual so long as it is ensured by the state to be intact. Rawls sees the same but goes further claiming its being ensured as coextensive with promoting things in the same manner of fairness. Meanwhile, Sen sees equality as a basic political capability—equality in any capability. However, this capability is only brought about by larger institutions and not coming from the individual. May therefore describes these political philosophies as a philosophy of political passivity due to the similar perspective that equality is something given by the state, instead of subjects enacting it on their own. See Todd May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 1-37. Cited hereafter as *The Political Thought*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

transcendentally bestowed upon us, abolishing its immanent features as a key element for political realization. This idea of equality animates a variety of political philosophies, generating justifications on the necessity of real inequality for doing politics, explanations on the system of oppression in the social realm, and even the creation of a sufficient reason in order to account for the structural inequalities of a hierarchy.

These philosophies presuppose that equality is an object yet to be distributed by the state to its subjects. Moreover, they emphasize more on the existing real inequalities, compelling people to think that Rousseau's egalitarian claim that all men are *by nature* equal is either too ideal, if not unrealizable. Meanwhile, these philosophies focus on the very question of how rights and privileges are to be distributed in harmony, how burdens and responsibilities ought to be shared by subjects. Distribution and implementation are the main political activities, instead of participation. These philosophies have worked out on exorcizing the egalitarian principle from the category of the subject. Such political practice is highly evident in how people have been politically passive as they initially assume that men are not equal in reality and therefore should work for it. It is for these reasons that we remain utterly passive.

Echoing C. B. Macpherson, William Connolly describes political apathy being not necessarily dangerous to democracy *per se*, but cautions us that it becomes functional for authoritarianism to pervade within any democratic society.¹⁰ Instead of the democracy's demise as the aim of

¹⁰ Connolly states: "Apathy among the majority of citizens now becomes functional to democracy. For intensive participation is inefficient to rational individuals. It also activates antidemocratic authoritarianism in the masses. And it overloads the political system with demands it cannot meet. The equilibrium model, according to Macpherson, sinks participation under three waves: first, by treating democracy as the institutional means to register 'the desires of people as they are' rather than a process that contributes 'to what they might be or wish to be'; second, by condensing the desires and interests of citizens into the vocabulary of possessive individualism; third, by legitimizing elitist barriers against popular pressures and demands that exceed the capacity of the state to respond to them ... Democracy now becomes a vehicle for rationalizing and legitimizing the limited capacity of the state to represent citizens within the existing class structure." William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 79.

authoritarian rule, the former becomes a condition for the possibility of the latter: an acceptable appearance for authoritarianism to the people it dominates, and aided by repressive ideologies that further drive us into apathy in order to maintain systemic oppressive rule. What is truly affected by this ontological conditioning of the social order is the political subjectivity of a citizen. For without an active political subjectivity, all sociopolitical activities are reduced into blind obedience to unjust rulers and to the hegemony of a ruling ideology. From this initial observation, one realizes that [political] subjects of democracy can never reconcile the democratic vision with the actualization of the antidemocratic authoritarian impulse.

How then should we address this haunting crisis of democratic politics? Perhaps we must frame Agamben's question earlier into the context of our investigation: *What does it mean to be a political subject?* According to Oliver Harrison, the question of political subjectivity, with emphasis on its revolutionary dimension, has become more prominent in political discourses.¹¹ Contemporary political philosophy shifts the direction of its focus from investigating the nature of the state or the sovereign to the examination of political subjectivity primarily because of our current understanding of power. As Michel Foucault contends, the nature of political power is already dispersed from the level of sovereignty to the mass, and people began to realize the constitutive force coming from

¹¹ Oliver Harrison, *Revolutionary Subjectivity in Post-Marxist Thought* (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014), 1; Matthew Abbott also views the same trend in his examination of Agamben's political ontology, wherein he claims that political ontology is necessarily post-metaphysical, and must concern itself to thinking deeply the problematic blind spots of the social structure, in order to avoid the negligence to being political. See Matthew Abbott, *The Figure of This World: Agamben and the Question of Political Ontology* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2014), 16; Michael Marder and Ranabir Samaddar echoes this shift to political subjectivity in their own ways, where the former examines Carl Schmitt's non-objectivist political ontology and the latter examines political subjectivity not as selfhood but as identity of actions. See Michael Marder, *Groundless Existence: The Political Ontology of Carl Schmitt* (New York: Continuum, 2010), and Ranabir Samaddar, *Emergence of the Political Subject* (New Delhi: Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2014).

the body politic.¹² To limit politics as the exercise of power reduces it into an apparatus of implementation that renders it susceptible to oppression, forgetting once again the democratic promise. It is through the context of equality that the individual's political subjectivity is intertwined or even embedded in democracy. In other words, engaging politically means to embody the equality existing within democracy. It is no wonder that one confidently engages in politics realizing she is equal among others, most especially in the discursive deliberation or even in rational civil disobedience. Such warrants an investigation into the meaning of political subjectivity, with emphasis on the process of political subjectivization, or how an individual person emerges into a political subject. And in line with this investigation, we may hope to recover an alternative if not a re-defined meaning of democracy.

Paradigmatic in this regard is the political thought of Jacques Rancière, a French philosopher and a former student of the structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser. His philosophy of radical equality, described as *radical egalitarianism*, represents one of the most important and original contributions to philosophic thought and extends to various fields such as politics, art, history, and pedagogy. Although political subjectivization is just one of the variety of elements in his political theory, it could be considered as a significant part of it. Rancière was primarily concerned with the emancipative project as an invitation to thought in refiguring the perception of social world, thus inevitably changing material social conditions, ultimately revolving around the process of political subjectivization. His version of democratic theory is a radical vision of equality concretizing itself into polemic moments that are revelatory of the nature of our political setting.

At the fundamental level of his political theory lies the principle of equality. This is because equality, for Rancière, is both the initiation and

¹² Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 188.

realization of emancipation.¹³ Two anglophonic commentators, Todd May and Oliver Davies, claim that the locus of Rancière's emancipative project is a different position on equality that goes beyond preceding notions in the history of philosophy and political thought, inferring two propositions: First, according to May, Rancière's theory of equality must be understood as 'active' and in opposition with 'passive.' As mentioned earlier, previous political philosophies grounded from an egalitarian principle have been concerned with what institutions are obliged to give people, rather than what those people do politically.¹⁴ The unfortunate consequences of this *passive* undertaking of equality is the weakening of political rationality and the reduction of political motivations, rendering the possibility of socialization mobilized only either by fear of things harmful for the social individual or by meritocracy of what may be given in return, for serving a social order that is both neoliberal and explicative—crystalizing thus into a culture of passivity. Equality is treated as the goal of political activity, an absent ideal that must be realized at the end of political engagement. Such ideal, more than often (however), remains always-already absent.

Rancière's version of equality is 'active' insofar as it is not simply a realization, but the point of departure from which politics and all political activities are possible. Equality is presupposed.¹⁵ In this sense, we may infer the second proposition on Rancière's theory of equality: as it is presupposed, all that is left is to verify it in social reality.¹⁶ Politics should actively practice equality even in the simplest socialization processes, not to simply contain it in our utopian blueprint. According to Davies, equality for Rancière is "structural insofar as it is seen to be the necessary precondition of any contingent unequal order of hierarchy."¹⁷ We could

¹³ See May, *The Political Thought*; and Oliver Davies, *Jacques Rancière (Key Contemporary Thinkers)* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010). Cited hereafter as *Rancière*.

¹⁴ May, *The Political Thought*, 4.

¹⁵ Ian James, "Jacques Rancière: The Space of Equality," in *The New French Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 112.

¹⁶ Davies, *Rancière*, 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

perceive of inequalities only from the standpoint of equality. Equality is “not given, nor it is claimed; it is practiced and it is verified.”¹⁸ To better understand this theorization of equality, perhaps the idea of *space* serves as a good modifier: to participate in the social order means to possess a space in it, and every participant should be able to understand one’s place as her own space within the social realm. Rancière argues that,

There is order in society because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things must be required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be equal of the person who is ordering you.¹⁹

Significant in Rancière's conception on equality is the capacity to understand the world or the social realm. Ian James contends that Rancière’s conception of equality, inequality, and the social order are intrinsically tied up with the human capacity for communication and speech.²⁰ The experience of the world is necessarily and inevitably communal insofar as it is a world perceived from an interobjective standpoint or horizon of perception common to all those who inhabit it.²¹ It is through the equal inclusion *via* the sharing of common horizon that forms our world; And the world divides itself, distributes to us our space for political participation. From this notion of the distribution of the sensible (Fr. *le partage du sensible*), Rancière’s theorization constructs how political subjects emerge and realize their place in the socio-political

¹⁸ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 137. Cf. Davies, *Rancière*, 30-32. Rancière provides further account on equality residing in the heart of politics in his work *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (*La Mésentente: Politique et philosophie*) specifically stating that: “inequality is only possible through equality.” Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. by Julie Rose (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 17.

¹⁹ Rancière, *Disagreement*, 16.

²⁰ James, *The New French Philosophy*, 114.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

realm. But how does one presuppose equality here? Equality only generates politics, “when it is implemented in the specific form of a particular case of *dissensus*.”²² For Rancière, politics occur in the antagonism of the heard and the unheard, specifically when the unheard affirm their existence by suddenly becoming heard, simultaneously rectifying what was supposed to belong to them: their space in politics—therefore, correcting the distribution of the sensible. True politics exist in the form of an initiative and not an implementation: when there is popular uprising of the unheard, of the particulars, as they assert their right to be equal to others.²³

Rancière contends that politics is not merely a question of who exercises power within a social structure, a given set of political relations, or a matter of policing power. It is a struggle over the character of the structures and relations themselves.²⁴ If a culture of passivity would be tolerated, critical consciousness and social awareness would diminish. Oppression further enters the frame as it is welcomed by the passive social condition. The words of Marx and Rancière in the epigraphs of this paper speak of an alternative. What must be done is a radical affirmation of equality from the very beginning. Contrary to the view of equality as an ideal, Rancière perceives equality not as an abstract value or a kind of a quasi-transcendental interest that can be examined through rational calculations or ethical judgments.²⁵ A capacity rather than an interest, he offers an alternative into how we should act politically regardless of what can be offered in return to us by government institutions. It is an emancipatory politics exorcized of passive equality, capable of diagnosing

²² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics, The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London & New York: Continuum, 2006), 52.

²³ Nick Hewlett, *Badiou, Balibar, Rancière: Rethinking Emancipation* (London, New York: Continuum Publishing International Group, Ltd., 2007), 101. Cited hereafter as *Rethinking Emancipation*.

²⁴ Mark Purcell, “Introduction. For a politics we have yet to imagine,” in *Space and Polity*, 18:2 (2014), 117-121.

²⁵ James, *The New French Philosophy*, 112. Also cf. May, *The Political Thought*, 6-35.

the pathologies of social decay, and resisting various forms of domination by the ruling ideology.

The present investigation attempts to introduce the reader to Rancière's solution to the problem of political decadence and passivity. In doing so, it would necessitate a discussion on the radical affirmation of the principle of equality and how this axiom becomes the basis for his version of emancipatory politics. Essentially, Rancière's philosophy of equality offers a three-fold solution: Firstly, Rancière's radically egalitarian thoughts render the ability to emancipate minds towards real political activity and diminish political passivity. This would eventually describe Rancière's political program as a 'politics of intellectual emancipation,' informed by a specific vigilance to historicity. Secondly, being emancipated renders individuals to engage in dissensual activities that would disrupt the structural dominance of oppressive police orders. Such dissensual activities, oscillating between politics and aesthetics, would initiate the construction of new forms of sensibilities wherein active participation is introduced to the distribution of the sensible. Finally, given the creation of new worlds from the new forms of sensibilities, Rancière offers a different theory of the subject through political subjectivization: a political subject capable of emancipation and enacting the egalitarian axiom through a variety of dissensual activities, and is required in the creation of a truly egalitarian world. This piece, being first of two parts, explores the first fold of Rancière's politics of intellectual emancipation.

RADICAL EQUALITY

Equality is the central theme that unifies all of Rancière's *œuvre*. It is obvious, however, that Rancière was not the first to celebrate the concept into one's political theory. What distinguishes him from the mainstream political philosophies (such as social contract theory, liberal and neoliberal theory, etc.) is its rootedness in the *realpolitik* of the ordinary person. Such radicality has two main features: first, equality for Rancière is not a

concept, but a praxis. It is not an abstract value that would function as a quasi-transcendental interest for people to engage in politics and other social concerns.²⁶ It is neither a goal nor a *telos* directed by politics. It is a concrete principle—a real political expression concretized through the activity of its verification. As mentioned previously, equality “is not given, nor is it claimed; it is practiced, it is *verified*.”²⁷ Such principle is necessarily the starting point, paradoxically a condition that is unconditional, that which initiates the possibility of politics. Rancière writes:

Equality was not an end to attain, but a point of departure, a *supposition* to maintain in every circumstance. Never would truth speak up for it. Never would equality exist except in its verification and at the price of being verified always and everywhere.²⁸

And in *The Politics of Aesthetics: Distribution of the Sensible*, Rancière further notes that:

Equality is what I have called a presupposition. It is not, let it be understood, a founding ontological principle but a condition that only functions when it is put into action. Consequently, politics is not based on equality in the sense that others try to base it on some general human predisposition such as language or fear. Equality is actually the condition required for being able to think politics.²⁹

These preliminary descriptions of equality are supported by a second feature, which states that equality is equality *per se*, not equality of

²⁶ James, *The New French Philosophy*, 112.

²⁷ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 137.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁹ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 126.

something else. Different from Rancière's views, most political philosophies mobilized by egalitarian ideals treat equality in the form of substantive achievements often accomplished by the state, e.g., In order to achieve equality, the state should improve on increasing the salary of workers so that they could be financially equal with those who hold more economic power in our country. Another example is the creation of opportunities that would entail equal recognition for people in all social categorizations such as gender, race, culture, and religion. Within such political philosophies contrary to Rancière's, equality is understood in the objects that would characterize us as equal citizens of a state. The state would be compelled to delegate objects that would account for its people to be equal to one another. It is also from this perspective wherein equality is something given or offered by the state, instead of treating equality as starting point for the people to actively engage in politics regardless of the tolerated meritocratic dynamic of 'interest' politics. Rancière is convinced otherwise: for him, equality is practiced by the subject, since it is not about how political opportunities, powers, privileges and spaces are imposed to the citizens by the government. It is about the real political activity of the subject. Such principle does not rely on any substantial achievement or privilege in order for it to exist as our concrete universal. It is not given by any other political entities or groups.³⁰ Meaning to say, equality is immanent in our political subjectivity. We are reminded that Rancière's conception of equality is intrinsically embedded within the human capabilities for communication and speech.³¹ Such embeddedness leaves us wondering about the very conditions of how voices are audible and how people can make themselves audible to the rest of society in the first place.³² Thus, in the *Philosopher and His Poor*, Rancière writes of radical equality:

³⁰ Rancière, *Disagreement*, 30-32.

³¹ James, *The New French Philosophy*, 114.

³² Todd May, "Wrong, disagreement, subjectification," in *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, ed. by Jean-Philippe Deranty (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 73.

Equality is not a goal that governments and societies could succeed in reaching. To pose equality as a goal is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance they promise that they will abolish. Equality is a presupposition, an initial axiom—or it is nothing. And this egalitarian axiom subtends in the last instance the inegalitarian order itself. It is in vain that the superior gives orders to his inferior if the inferior does not understand at least two things: first, the content of the order, and second, that he must obey it. But for the inferior to understand this, he must already be the equal of the superior.³³

Any participation within a hierarchical order requires its members to understand the order and their place within the order.³⁴ The totality of this philosophical initiative is largely based on the fact of shared communication and understanding.³⁵ In other words, Rancière disjunctively sees that the members of an inegalitarian social order should understand their place within it, communicate accordingly for the hierarchy to institute and maintain itself, or to create new political possibilities whereby equality is championed in all forms of social activity. These initial reflections on Rancière's notion of equality methodologically requires a specific acquisition of a *logos* (as a specific reasoned thought) as a means to verify and enact the emancipatory potential for subjects to commit themselves politically. It therefore is necessary that I must add the

³³ Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, trans. by John Drury, Corinne Oster and Andrew Parker (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), 223.

³⁴ Rancière further clarifies in another work: "You must be already be equal to the person who is ordering you." Rancière, *Disagreement*, 16-17. Cf. James, *The New French Philosophy*, 113.

³⁵ One could not help but notice the Heideggerian tone in this mode of philosophy, analogizing it as Dasein's attempt to locate his worldhood-of-the-world, his belonging to his own environment. The only difference between Rancière and Heidegger is that the former tries to bring to philosophy an emancipatory potential of having the world refigured and transformed. See James, *The New French Philosophy*, 113.

description ‘radical’ in order to distinguish Rancière’s version of equality from others.

PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY OF INTELLIGENCES: *THE IGNORANT SCHOOLMASTER*

Rancière’s suggestive reformulations of equality were inscribed in the work *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987). Subtitled *Five Lessons on Intellectual Emancipation*, it is a biography on the life and pedagogical method of an eccentric teacher, Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840). Rancière’s version of radical equality advances as an exploration of the idea of emancipation through tackling questions of pedagogy and its crisis of intellectual heirarchization. Such work is a resource for a timely critique of some obsolete methodologies in teaching and schooling in general. While Rancière tackles questions related to pedagogy and education, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* provides his reformulation of the notion of equality—a notion which is insubstantial and is initiated by the practices of the subject in forms of realization against the backdrop of false dependency between two kinds of intelligences.³⁶ I argue that the lesson of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is the first among the folds of his solution to the culture of political passivity: intellectual emancipation.

During the Bourbon Restoration of monarchy in France, Jacotot was forced into exile and taught French literature at the University of

³⁶ Joshua Ewalt contends that philosophy of education is only a short detour in the whole emancipatory project of radical egalitarianism. For him, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is not as pedagogical text in itself. It is implicitly political. However, this biography of a pedagogue is saturated of lessons concerning the politicization of learning between a master and a student. As Ewalt claims: “It elucidates a method that occurs whenever and wherever within the social order, a person, operating from a presumption of human equality, positions a material text, including the materiality of oral communication, as an egalitarian link between two bodies and demands another person verify his or her equality by learning and repeating the text and improving with it. Its aim is to emancipate those who believe otherwise.” Joshua P. Ewalt, “Rhetoric, Poetics, and Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in intellectual Emancipation*,” in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 49:1 (2016), 33.

Leuven. It was then that he encountered the unfortunate situation as a teacher: his students were speaking in Flemish, a language which Jacotot had no knowledge how to speak, while Jacotot spoke in French. How can he teach French literature using a language he has no knowledge of speaking? He was unable to teach them anything in the ordinary way but instead, Jacotot had instructed them to read a bilingual edition (in Flemish and French) of François Fénelon's *Télémaque*. Lo and behold, the students were able to learn French, translate each word alternately in French and Flemish even better than Jacotot.³⁷ Even without explanation, the students mastered the course with an ignorant teacher. In this narrative, Rancière generates a powerful observation:

Between one and the other an opacity has now set in. It concerns *understanding*, and this word alone throws a veil over everything: understanding is what the child cannot do without the explanations of a master—later, of as many masters as there are materials to understand, all presented in a certain progressive order ... Explication is not necessary to remedy an incapacity to understand. On the contrary, that very incapacity provides the structuring fiction of the explicative conception of the world. It is the explicator who needs the incapable and not the other way around; it is he who constitutes the incapable as such. To explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself. Before being the act of the pedagogue, explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid.³⁸

³⁷ See Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 1-16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

What Rancière means is that ordinary pedagogy, Jacotot concluded, is based on the premise of intellectual inequality—expressed in the hierarchization of both knowledge and authority which is structurally imposed between the teacher and students. This pedagogical myth divides the world into two, consequently dividing intelligence into two: “an inferior intelligence and a superior one.” Explication, from this point of view, becomes “enforced stultification.”³⁹ Jacotot realized that explication could no longer remedy the incapacity to understand. On the contrary, he would claim that it is, in fact, the other way around: “the very incapacity provides the structuring fiction of the explicative conception of the world.”⁴⁰ Those who explain needed those who still could not understand. Such phenomenon is constitutive of an incapacity to the learning subjects. And the very act of explication, or explanation, requires one to show the people that they could not understand by themselves without a master.

From Jacotot’s realization, Rancière advances a provocative statement of the egalitarian axiom to function as an alternative to the explicative order of schools and society: “*all men have equal intelligence*.”⁴¹ This is based on the presumption that students are equal in intelligence, enabling them to construct the words to express their incapacity into the knowledge of which the students themselves thought to be incapable and unable to acquire independently. The human child is first of all a speaking being. She learns by himself, guided but not stultified by the mother, the language of a world foreign to each one at first—the mother tongue.⁴² Thereafter, every individual can learn through constant experimentation. Equality is at work when the guidance of the teacher, through attention,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7. In another statement, Rancière writes: “The essential act of the master was to *explicate*: to disengage the simple elements of learning, and to reconcile their simplicity in principle with the factual simplicity that characterizes young and ignorant minds. To teach was to simply transmit learning and form minds simultaneously, by leading those minds, according to an ordered progression, from the most simple to the most complex.” Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 18, 101.

⁴² See *Ibid.*, 11, 25.

makes an intelligence proceed to overcome the absolute constraints of the will. The significance of pedagogical authority in the classrooms remains not as the necessary cause for the students' learning outcomes, but rather the capability to assume the equality of intelligences of every single one. Intelligence, by nature, is not unequal; only its manifestations, according to the standards of various metric systems. We all differ from the amount of attention to commit ourselves to the processes of learning as we are affected by many factors and perhaps by the demands of our respective situation.⁴³ According to Rancière, the real problem of learning is “to reveal an intelligence to itself.”⁴⁴

This radical conception of equality is expressed in the form of a *presupposition*—declared at first and then verified thereafter. Emancipation, in this sense, is an intellectual emancipation. Emancipative practice of educating others liberates the pure powers of reason, constantly attending to the student's concerns and wonders. This continuous vigilance to the learning-process aids students to learn even far beyond what the master does. Rancière remarks,

Whoever teaches without emancipating stultifies. And whoever emancipates doesn't have to worry about what the emancipated person learns. He will learn what he wants, nothing maybe. He will know he can learn because the same intelligence is at work in all the productions of the human mind, and a man can always understand a man's word.⁴⁵

The core of intellectual emancipation lies in “recognizing that there are not two levels of intelligence, that any human work of art is the practice of the same intellectual potential.”⁴⁶ An emancipated person

⁴³ Ewalt, “Rhetoric, Poetics, and Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*,” 32.

⁴⁴ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 28.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

conscientiously reflects on her own intellectual acts, gives them attention, and explores new territories of this capacity by bringing to bear the same equal capacity of anyone with anyone. In teaching a human person who *was* considered to be ignorant, one should not stultify them by demarcating a line between a level of knowledge and another. For both Rancière and Jacotot, the practice of intellectual emancipation may be summed up with the question: “What do you think about it?”⁴⁷ It is a question of verifying the intellectual capacity of those who encounters the question, becoming the avenue for their realization. For it is possible that only through the posing of such question that a capacity reveals itself to the ones capacitated. What characterizes this emancipatory element is the ability to be conscious of what an intelligence can do under the presupposition that everyone has equal intelligence. Emancipation is intuitive of the principle of equality of intelligences, fueled by the hope for intelligible capacities to arrive at realizations through verification (in the sense of confirming them in activities) alone. In schooling, teachers need not equate their level of intelligence to their students, since that is not the goal of emancipation. Specifically, for Rancière and Jacotot, what stultifies the common people is “not the lack of instruction, but the belief in the inferiority of their intelligence.”⁴⁸ Hence, from the pedagogical model proposed by Jacotot, Rancière uses this critique of schooling, on the one hand, in order to reveal the hypocrisy of intellectuals who declare themselves to be emancipators while they stultify the common people. On the other hand, Rancière’s emancipative project focuses rather on the common people’s realization that they too can learn and can free themselves from the chains of the illusion of their ignorance.

Rancière, through Jacotot’s intellectual adventure, proposes that emancipation does not happen just because a superior entity or an authority is ousted or steps down from his privileged position. It does not happen just because the inferior overcomes the master. Rather,

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

emancipation entails the separation of the master from the monopoly of mastery. The sole possession of knowledge is castrated from the master, dispersing it to others, thus allowing each one to act according to the presupposition that they too can do what a master can: *understand*. If pedagogy is to be considered egalitarian, it should begin from the assumption that all human beings are equally intelligent. That all of us possess the same capacity for understanding.⁴⁹

Note that the ‘equality of intelligence’ does not mean that all human beings are manifestly all the same (and equally) intelligent or stupid people. According to Rancière, “Our problem isn’t proving that all intelligence is equal. It’s seeing what can be done under that supposition. And for this, it’s enough for us that the opinion be possible—that is, that no opposing truth be proved.”⁵⁰ All it assumes that it is in the nature of being human to be able to understand, the ability to produce sense into her world. And this capacity cannot be rigidly categorized or quantified. The educator, as an emancipator, must presuppose the principle of equality of intelligences in order to avoid the inferiority complex being imposed upon the student. Meanwhile, the pedagogical myth is also reflected as vicissitudes in the realm of politics, wherein the oppressed would not be truly emancipated because they are tied in the chains of an intellectual.⁵¹ Instead of emancipating them, the intellectual teaches the oppressed that they cannot be free by themselves. The oppressed must realize that emancipation is only possible from the immanent principle of equality, not by remaining in the chains of a transcendent repressive intellectual. The political implication of intellectual emancipation is that people may be able

⁴⁹ Rancière writes: “Power cannot be divided up. There is only one power, that of saying and speaking, of paying attention to what one sees and says. One learns sentences and more sentences; one discovers facts, that is, relations between things, and still other relations that are all of the same nature; one learns to combine letters, words, sentences, ideas. It will not be said that one has acquired science, that one knows truth or has become a genius. But it will be known that, in the intellectual order, one can do what any man can do.” *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵¹ Clayton Crocket, “Pedagogy and Radical Equality: Rancière’s Ignorant Schoolmaster,” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 12:2 (2012), 167.

to participate in the social realm because they have the capacity to understand it. The method of equality is a method of the will, for “[o]ne could learn by oneself and without the master explicator when one wanted to, propelled by one’s own desire or by the constraints of the situation.”⁵² And the subordination of the master’s intelligence to the student’s intelligence would result in stultification, especially when the will of the student is not strong enough to keep him on track of learning and understanding. But when the master encourages the will of his student, even while the intelligence of one is directed towards the learning material, it would result in the possibility of learning that rightfully deserves the name *emancipation*.

Everyone has the equal capacity to understand the social world, rendering the possibility for a communal perception of the inequality in the social realm. Only when a human being realizes that one is capable of understanding the world does she realize everyone’s right to dwell within a space or part of it. And it is by realizing the power to emancipate oneself that the first steps of the verification of equality are taken. As stated earlier, what stultifies them is believing in the inferiority of their own intelligence. The dependency on the master will not create an ignorant consciousness, but rather a kind of intellectual laziness which is negligently imposed by the knowledge of superiority by master-explicators.

Intelligence is the power to affirm in oneself the ability to be understood through another’s verification, for an equal can be understood only by another equal. And, again, both Rancière and Jacotot are not claiming that intelligences are equal. They *might* be equal.⁵³ But this possibility should never be underestimated, for it can be the basis upon which human beings may share something in common⁵⁴—the foundation

⁵² Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 12.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 72. Italics mine.

⁵⁴ This is not to be treated univocal to Jürgen Habermas’ and Axel Honneth’s different take on the idea of a quasi-transcendental interest. Though having the same features of immanence to mankind and also a point of departure to doing politics, a quasi-transcendental interest is not the same with Rancière’s principle of equality, for the latter is

for the creating a community: a community of equals. To believe in the equality of intelligence means assuming that all people are capable of understanding each other's thoughts, emotions, opinions and fundamentally, the basic constituent of one's selfhood.⁵⁵ Intellectual emancipation is not simply about learning. Emancipation is about using one's intelligence under the assumption of the equality of intelligence. It is the power of belief to free others, capacitating them to the level of an equal. It is about demanding in the people what we initially thought to be impossible.

VIGILANT HISTORICITY

Intellectual emancipation entails a specific vigilance to one's spatio-temporal position. Verifying equality based on its presumption and rejecting the myth of intellectual hierarchy would capacitate everyone to engage with each other as an equal. Rancière's emancipative theory asserts the importance of the experiences of the ordinary people as they are overlooked and neglected by the oppressor who recognize themselves as emancipators. In addressing the problems of intellectual oppression, Rancière argues that the principle of equality of intelligences would necessarily propel the individual to the position of an equal, specifically in attempting to look at activities from the location of "being-there." To locate oneself from the standpoint of equality, it would mean for politics to be

not essentially pre-political, but rather its essence is political and already determined by its own practices. Both Habermas' and Honneth's versions of quasi-transcendental interest, on the contrary, is a pre-political ground gathered from mutual interdependence with everyone, may it be language or human nature. Rancière is paradoxically critical of this "shared" mutual interdependence, given his distaste on the exclusionary aspects of what is *shared* in common within consensus and consensus-based politics. This would eventually signify Rancière's difference from Recognition Theory. See also Axel Honneth, "Recognition and Justice," in *Acta Sociologica*, 47:4 (December 2004), 354.

⁵⁵ See Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 9-10, and 63-64.

plotted in historical configurations.⁵⁶ Individuals, as equals with one another, can understand the when and how of an event (historical, by nature) that is considered to be political or merely designed according to the processes of policing. It validates the experiences of the ordinary, verifying that anyone can understand what is going on in society. Being conscious that “you have to be in *this* place,”⁵⁷ vigilant historicity verifies the active engagement of individuals as an expression of how they presuppose equality as a point of departure. In all events in history, we perceive moments of politics—the perception of which determines them as either potential moments or arrested ones.⁵⁸ These political moments are the very emplotments, or stages where the disjunctive logics meet and resist each other: equality or inequality. The emancipatory element surfaces when the principle of equality is capable of pointing to inequalities what inequalities will always be powerless to imagine.⁵⁹

Whenever political moments happen by surprise, meaning a form of emplotment in the historical configuration without the rational calculations made by social scientific discourses, individuals become aware that “something is happening.” It is a form of anticipatory consciousness focusing on the present political moment—one which pertains to the attentiveness towards the insurrectionary nature of political moments. Such vigilance, or a lesson of history, is a recognition of a decision, or the commitment to equality which Rancièrian theory requires. Kristin Ross provides an important description of this vigilance in her analysis of the emancipatory potential in historical events:

⁵⁶ Jacques Rancière, “The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions,” in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 287.

⁵⁷ Jacques Rancière and Sudeep Dagupta, “Interview: Art is Going Eslewhere and Politics Has to Catch It: An Interview with Jacques Rancière,” in *Krisis*, 9:1 (2008), 72. Emphasis original.

⁵⁸ Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lesson of Rancière* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 25.

⁵⁹ See Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 89.

The “lesson” of history at best, is to recognize the moment of a choice, of the unforeseeable, to draw from history neither lessons nor, exactly, explanations, but the principle of a vigilance toward what there is that is singular in each call to order and in each confrontation.⁶⁰

Rancière lets history be the judge of how a political rupture would evolve.⁶¹ Once political moments happen, they require our attention, extracting the lessons that would function as “inscriptions of equality,” leaving traces that would inform future political activities. Not only do these inscriptions act exemplary, but they also provide discursive tools for doing politics.⁶² These inscriptions become diagnostic patterns that would reveal the symptoms of emancipatory impotence and, thus, hopes to give birth to suggestive principles for reconfiguring the sensible. However, Rancière does not adhere to a kind of historical continuum and other metanarratives, specifically pertaining to a movement towards progress. These inscriptions inform and strengthen the emancipatory potential in every individual as an equal, but they are not to be integrated in the discourse of emancipation as the sole cause for a political moment to happen rigidly. In his other works, Rancière would repeat the very description of politics as a surprise, provided its polemical nature. Politics may not be caused by the subject, but it does exist as *moments politique* (and thus, historical). Overcoming the Althusserian influence on his philosophy of history, Rancière remains to doubt this historical continuum and firmly claims that if emancipation happens (i.e. event), it would always

⁶⁰ Editorial, *Révoltes Logiques*, 5 (1977), 6. Translation quoted from Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 128.

⁶¹ Jean-Philippine Deranty, “Between Honneth and Rancière: Problems and Potentials of a Contemporary Critical Theory,” in *Recognition or Disagreement: A Critical Encounter on the Politics of Freedom, Equality, and Identity*, ed. Katia Genel and Jean-Philippe Deranty (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2016), 74.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 76.

happen *outside* of time.⁶³ Worker struggles, for example, could be considered as moments of verifying equality in forms of emancipation, given that the workers, instead of spending time with the occupation they were assigned with (considering how a scheduled work is always arrested in time), use the time for expressing autonomy and doing revolutionary activities. It is for this reason that being emancipated warrants the active attention to what is happening at the moment rather than passively following a metanarrative of historical structure towards emancipation. For Rancière, awareness to one's place in space and time—the attentiveness to what is happening at the moment—features how one sees historical events as political moments from the standpoint of the egalitarian axiom.

Rancière's politics of intellectual emancipation extends its experimentations of the principle of equality into developing an aesthetic *dispositif* that unfolds the sensory legitimacy (including its distortion) of a given socio-political order. He locates them in various practices of *dissensus*—which plurisignify collectively as another fold within Rancière's politics of intellectual emancipation. This, along with the third and final fold, will be treated in the next part.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 77.

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